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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001752

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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT
NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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SUBJECT: As plan to demobilize child soldiers gets under way, further reports of Tiger abductions

Refs: Colombo 1735, and previous

(U) Classified by Deputy Chief of Mission James F. Entwistle. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: A UNICEF-led program to demobilize child soldiers kicked off recently, and has sparked some debate. In a related development, reports now indicate that the day after the first "transit center" opened, the Tigers allegedly abducted several children in the east. The issue of child soldiers continues to be contentious, and could have far-reaching ramifications. END SUMMARY.

Program kicks off

2. (C) A UNICEF-led program to demobilize child soldiers was inaugurated recently, and has sparked some debate. The program, which calls for the setting up of three "transit centers" for former child soldiers, would be managed jointly by UNICEF and the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO), a pro-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) NGO. The first of the centers opened on October 3 in Kilinochchi in the north, with 49 former child soldiers being placed in the facility. The program is the result of a UNICEF-led action plan approved by the GSL and the LTTE aimed at releasing children from the LTTE and returning them to their families. Children entering the transit centers would be questioned as to the details of their involvement with the Tigers, and put through an assessment to gauge the impact of psychological damage. They would be reunited with their families following a program of rehabilitation, and Save the Children social workers would monitor each case. Speaking at the opening ceremony on October 3, UNICEF representative in Sri Lanka Ted Chaiban stated that although the program was a positive development, reports of recruitment continued.

Criticism over TRO involvement

3. (C) The program has sparked some debate, however, with some critics stating in the press that the program lacks accountability and needs to be more transparent. Professor Harendra De Silva, chairman of the National Child Protection Authority, a leading child rights institution, told poloff on October 7 that the presence of the TRO in the transit centers would be detrimental to the rehabilitation of the children. De Silva further stated that since the TRO was so closely affiliated with the LTTE, the children would not be able to speak freely against the LTTE without fear of reprisal once they returned to their homes. De Silva opined that the program was an attempt by the LTTE to curry favor with the international community.

4. (SBU) The press has also been skeptical of the TRO's involvement in the program, with THE ISLAND -- a independent opposition daily -- stating in an editorial on October 6 "The transit homes for children need to be made totally independent of the LTTE. From the involvement of the TRO, a notorious LTTE front in the running of transit homes, it is manifestly evident that the LTTE is in control of them and continues to wield influence on the inmates. These homes must be brought under the direct control of an independent organization with an impeccable track record and located away from the LTTE's reach."

5. (C) Responding to criticism of the TRO's involvement in the project, UNICEF representative Ted Chaiban told poloff on October 8 that the TRO's involvement was necessary, noting that the alternative to working with the TRO meant that there would be no mechanism to demobilize the child soldiers. Chaiban added that he felt the TRO were "genuine" in trying to resolve the issue of child recruitment, and opined that the TRO had

had a "positive" influence on the LTTE in terms of changing the Tiger attitude towards the rehabilitation of child soldiers. Chaiban further noted that criticism towards the program had been unduly harsh, and focused on the TRO's ties to the LTTE, rather than on the larger issue of the effective rehabilitation of children.

Reports of abductions continue

16. (C) Shortly after the transit center opened, however, reports indicate that several children were abducted on October 4 near Batticaloa in the east. According to press reports, a large demonstration was held on October 6 to demand the release of the children. Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) spokeswoman Agnes Bragadottir told poloff on October 7 that monitors had gone to the scene of the abductions and been told that several children had been kidnapped, although the exact number of children remained unclear. Bragadottir noted that the SLMM was trying to arrange a meeting with the Tigers to secure the release of the children, but that the monitors had not been able to meet with the Tigers as of October 8.

17. (C) Following the reported abductions, UNICEF issued a strongly-worded press release on October 7 reprimanding the LTTE for the incident, characterizing the continued recruitment of children as "completely unacceptable," and noting that the LTTE's actions undermined the group's work and commitment toward making their efforts to demobilize child soldiers a success.

18. (C) COMMENT: The issue of child soldiers has long been a contentious one, with international pressure on the LTTE to end the practice. The LTTE have publicly stated that they no longer conscript children, however, evidence continues to indicate that they do. All in all, the issue of child soldiers will have to be dealt with one way or the other by the LTTE if they want to maintain credibility in peace negotiations and with the international community, particularly with donor countries. END COMMENT.

19. (U) Minimize considered.

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